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ABSTRACT

The function of basic writing in the university is to teach students whose language practices are most distant from prestige forms to use language in ways which will enable their advancement in college and in the world outside. In composition studies, the awareness that the intelligent activity of students can produce apparently "incoherent" prose requires appeals for the research community to decide what truly is or is not an error, and to monitor stages of growth in individual basic writers. The new research on error counsels instructors to read students' writing in context, which requires looking beyond a writer's "idiosyncratic grammar" to the broader network of relations between language and power that make basic writers' grammars what they are. To help students see their struggle with prestige forms of literacy in the context of the social stratification of language and power in American culture, they should read a variety of academic writings on ethnography, language, and literature. Whereas error researchers talk of development in mostly broad terms--replacing an erroneous rule with a conventional use--the ethnographic approach sanctions an interchange between cultures, legitimizing cultural differences by recognizing them as a primary object of study. (KEH)

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The Politics of Error: A Critique and a Proposal

The politics of error? -- as I immersed myself in researching this topic, the question began to haunt me of whether we researchers and teachers have already talked about error entirely too much, whether even our most enlightened thinking about error as an autonomous issue within composition studies could lead to nothing but the further disempowerment of our so-called basic writers, whether I should back off my commitment to write a paper on error simply because contributing to the complications of discourse on this subject could only amplify English teachers' already over-weighty consciousness of error. I write this paper with misgivings, taking comfort in the words of the philosopher: "Philosophy unties knots in our thinking; hence its result must be simple, but philosophizing has to be as complicated as the knots it unties" (Wittgenstein 81).

We like to think that the last decade's re-conceptualization of error in terms of the transactions that occur between readers, writers, and texts is an advance beyond the bare formalism that thought error was something as simple as a set of marks on a page. In the olden days,

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teachers carried in their heads lists of grammatical bete noirs, purified notions of logic, genre, argument, the English Language and saw the student's refusal or inability to abide by their language preferences as signs of laziness, a "cultural deficit," or ineducability. Nowadays, we recognize that, linguistically at least, Prestige English is a dialect among others; we recognize the need to reorient our catalogues of error with the pre-reflexive responses of real readers, who read for content rather than merely to spot transgressions; we recognize the complexity of the task the student faces in trying to appropriate and locate herself in the discourses of academic communities; we recognize the intelligence and systematicity of the basic writer's attempts to appropriate this discourse; we recognize error as a sign of a writer's growth. As Glynda Hull, one of the most progressive advocates of this new way of thinking, notes: "there has been a kind of paradigm shift in how writing instructors conceptualize the problems represented by error and editing" (56).

This paradigm shift, perhaps, could be traced back to Mina Shaughnessy's revelation in Errors and Expectations that errors are often meaningfully related to the intentions and composing processes of basic writers, and not merely an inherent characteristic of texts. David Bartholomae has gone further in the same line of inquiry, arguing that "error . . . can only be understood as evidence of intention. . . . The task for both teacher and researcher, then, is to discover

the grammar of ***that*** coherence, of the "idiosyncratic dialect" that belongs to a particular writer at a particular moment in the history of his attempts to imagine and reproduce the standard idiom of academic discourse" (255). Moreover, just as errors are produced through a writer's intelligent activity so they are received and ***noticed*** by a reader. As early as 1980, Joseph Williams called for a program of research to account for the wide "variety of responses that different 'errors' elicit." (153) However, while there has been an increasing amount of this kind of sophisticated work on the production and reception of error, not much thought has been given to the political meaning of error either as a practical or theoretical concept. This seems odd, considering that error is perhaps the only pedagogical category that poses itself as an absolute prohibition, that demands a non-negotiable "correction." Also, in the popular consciousness at least, the work of "correction" seems to be what writing teachers are primarily known for. What are the political meanings of these facts?

I would not go so far as to deny that this newly evolved transactional theory of error ***might*** help make composition instruction less oppressive for basic writers. But I do contest the notion that these changes constitute an authentic theorization of error since the institutional functions which have made error such a prominent concern for English teachers since the 19th century remain cloaked and unquestioned. The technology of instruction may have improved, but the social

aims of instruction remain uncriticized and largely unknown.

I will state the primary institutional functions of "basic writing" polemically because I do not have time to do otherwise. In bare terms, the function of basic writing in the university is to teach students whose language practices are most distant from prestige forms to use language in ways which will enable advancement in college and in the world outside. That project inevitably foists upon the student the burden of acculturation to the ethos of a privileged minority. Too often, the student's advancement is purchased at the price of the student's native concerns and needs, fragmenting her solidarity with others who share her cultural identity. Social and economic mobility is purchased at the price of cultural invisibility. This trade-off reveals the second function of basic writing in the university: to cull students who show signs of accepting the verbal ways of a privileged minority from those who don't. In basic writing, students are to learn --or not to learn -- how to deal with the ever present danger of revealing some sort of cultural inferiority through their language that could block their social and economic advancement.

I am not saying that this is what instructors of basic writing necessarily do or should do, but it is what they are expected to do -- though it wouldn't be stated in such bald terms -- by the significant majority of the university community and the larger society. In practice, instructors of basic writing may try to provoke critical thinking,

intellectual exploration, or whatever, but in the back of their minds even the most progressive instructors know that their meagre course is perhaps the only place where their basic writers will have a chance to err -- the word should now be problematic --and receive much sympathetic feedback about it. Hence the profession's concern in the last decade with finding humane means to accelerate the development of the basic writer's skill of locating and correcting errors.

The historical preoccupation of composition teachers with error, then, derives largely from the institutional position of writing as a "subject" in the university. The danger of this preoccupation is that it marks a capitulation to a system of education that supposes that the attainment of prestige forms of literacy is the work of two or three semesters -- in effect, a vaccination theory of literacy -- and ignores the fact that non-standard dialects, alienation from school, and poverty usually occur together in the same area and among the same students.

With this in mind, let me turn to the pedagogical implications of the new research on error. As Glynda Hull explains in her review of research on error, the first job of the instructor is to "understand the writer's idiosyncratic grammar" and then to "imagine ways to help the writer develop conventional rules in lieu of erroneous or incomplete ones" (59). Understanding the writer's grammar may be simple; Hull's example shows a writer who has "overgeneralized the "rule" that a sentence expresses a single thought, applying

it routinely to cases in which the thought requires two sentences" (58). Obviously, as Hull points out, the traditional explanation that a sentence expresses a complete thought will not help such a student. More often, though, understanding the source of a writer's error requires a complex analysis based on both textual analysis and interviews during which students "are encouraged to talk about their choices with reference to particular sentences." The complexity of this analysis is perhaps best demonstrated by reporting the results of one error researcher who discovers that in terms of the ***sources*** of error "there are at least eight different kinds [of error involving subject-verb agreement], most of which have very little to do with one another" (quoted in Bartholomae, 257).

Despite the often dizzying complexity of error when analyzed through the lens of modern theory, researchers on error almost always stress pedagogical applications. In this, they overlook the obvious. Carrying out an analysis of this complexity takes a lot of time. Given the pressured institutional setting in which teachers on the bottom end of the university totem pole work, this approach very likely demands that the student's errors become a dominant focus of instruction. Instead of the shotgun approach of the handbooks -- the same rules for all -- the new theory of error demands a ***targeted*** formalism --to each a rule according to his need.

Like the shift from formalism to reader-response

theory in literary studies, the shift from a formalist to the modern transactional theory of error seems mainly to have shored up a neo- or covertly formalist practice. In literary studies, the awareness that the intelligent activity of a reader could produce apparently "incoherent" interpretations of literary texts required an appeal to the to the "consensus of an interpretive community" to shore up the set of authoritative language practices called literary criticism. In composition studies, the awareness that the intelligent activity of students can produce apparently "incoherent" prose requires appeals to the research community to decide what truly is or is not an error, and "to chart stages of growth in individual basic writers" (267) Thus, two seminal articles that introduced the modern theory of error to composition teachers --Bartholomae's "The Study of Error" and William's "The Phenomenology of Error" -- both conclude by laying out goals for further research. For Williams, the task is to overcome the great variation in our definitions and responses to error by "determin[ing] in some unobtrusive way which rules of grammar the significant majority of careful readers notice and which they do not" (164). For Bartholomae, the "pressing" task is to determine "whether we can chart a sequence of "natural" development for the class of writers we call basic writers." Like the bulk of reader-response research, Bartholomae and Williams' research agendas are geared towards producing only the theory that the technical practice of language instruction needs to perform

the institutional ends assigned to it. Both lines of research acknowledge the intelligence of the basic writer or reader's use of language only to authorize a consolidation and formalization of the language norms to which the student must submit. Inevitably, these kinds of formalized norms and developmental sequences belie the actual variability of language practices, even of acceptable language practices, in the university and beyond. Moreover, such formalism -- even the new targeted formalism of modern pedagogy -- eclipses to the student the meanings of linguistic variability in school and in the culture at large.

Well, as you probably recognize by now, my purpose so far has been mainly to show how error research exemplifies the characteristic subordination of composition theory to the institutional functions of writing instruction. I have yet to suggest to you how to deal with the fact that "the significant majority" of readers in the real world do indeed judge the ***intelligence*** of writers based upon the writer's mastery of prestige forms of language use. To ignore that fact, you may say, is to leave the work of teaching behind. But, I say in return, to ***merely*** accept that fact is to mythologize power and, inadvertently, to become its instrument. So, then, what does one do?

The new research on error is correct in counselling us to read our students' writing in context. But if we are to read in context, then we need to ***read in context*** -- that is, we need to look beyond a writer's "idiosyncratic grammar" to

the broader network of relations between language and power that make our basic writers' grammars what they are. We need to enable our students to see their struggle with prestige forms of literacy in the context of the social stratification of language and power in our culture.

Recently, there have been some interesting curricular innovations, which I can only hastily sketch here, growing out of Shirley Brice Heath's seminal study of patterns of language use in two rural communities in North Carolina. In an article entitled "Students as Ethnographers: Investigating Language Use as a Way to Learn to Use the Language," Suzy Groden, Eleanor Kutz, and Vivian Zamel have outlined a curriculum which teaches students to use ethnographic methods to study language use within their families, home communities, and the academic community. For instance, the Zamel group had students examine the differences between formal and informal uses of language by asking them to tape a family dinner-table conversation; transcribe a narrative portion in which someone told a story about their experience; ask the teller to re-tell the story on tape for the class, an unfamiliar audience; and then compare the two versions. In conjunction with activities like these, students read a variety of academic writing on ethnography and on language and power. Students also examined literature, comparing, for instance, the style of language used in Anne Frank's Diary with the reports of German Field Commanders in the Netherlands.

The premise behind the Zamel group's approach is that the student's attempts to articulate differences between patterns of language use in home and school situations, in informal and formal situations, will speed the development of the student's ability to shift to a broader range of styles, particularly to formal written school language. Where the pedagogy I discussed in connection with research on error introduced a vocabulary for talking about language at the point of error, Zamel's approach introduces a vocabulary for talking about language as a means of discovering the student's own cultural resources. Where error researchers talk of development in mostly linear terms -- replacing an erroneous rule with a conventional one -- the ethnographic approach sanctions an interchange between cultures, legitimating cultural differences by recognizing them as a primary object of study.

Engaging students as ethnographers may, but will not necessarily, illuminate the political content of everyday life in ways liberating to the student. Certainly, the student has more opportunity to work through the ambivalences, the sense of invisibility and loss, that probably have inhibited her success in school in the first place. Certainly, the student begins to appreciate the complexity and integrity of the languages practices that help define her cultural identity.

Rather than view the student's acquisition of academic literacy as the source of her emerging freedom, we need to

begin to view the acquisition of literacy as a mostly spontaneous by-product of interested critical inquiry. The pedagogy I have so hastily sketched is appealing because it both provides a framework for critical inquiry *and* acknowledges the institutional position of writing instruction and the legitimate concern of instructors to speed the student's acquisition of survival levels of academic literacy with the best means possible. Perhaps such a pedagogy could lead beyond the literacy of academic survival to the student's critical understanding of her linguistic predicament and its causes. Or more promising still, perhaps such a student will forge a solidarity with others who share her interest in securing public recognition of the submerged cultural diversity of which she is a part.

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